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ABSTRACT

Recent emphasis on a more learner-centered approach to second language learning and teaching implies an enhanced and more demanding role for the teacher. Only a teacher can develop a learner-centered classroom. Recent developments in educational philosophy and linguistics have challenged many former assumptions about teacher roles and classroom practices with respect to teacher attitudes, knowledge, and skills. The teacher is no longer the dispenser of knowledge and distributor of sanctions and judgments, but a facilitator of learning, a resource, an adviser and co-participant in the learning process, who must necessarily re-examine the nature of his or her contribution to the learning process. The teacher must understand the nature of communication, of learning in general, of language learning in particular, and of the learner's own contribution to his or her development as a learner and communicator in the classroom where learning is both individually acquired and socially shared. Finally, the teacher needs a variety of specific skills to apply this knowledge to the learning experiences of the classroom, including a high degree of language knowledge; a critical, flexible, and experimental approach to teaching; an understanding of the interplay of process and product in language learning; and the ability to apply this awareness in classroom procedures and techniques. (MSE)

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IMPLICATIONS OF THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH FOR THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

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IMPLICATIONS OF THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH FOR THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

A REAL SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHER!

What do you think a real second language teacher is? A real second language teacher[1]_____.

A real second language teacher is on my side
A real second language teacher lets me be me and tries to understand what it's like to be me
A real second language teacher accepts me whether he or she likes me or not
A real second language teacher doesn't have expectations of me because of what I've been or what he or she has been
A real second language teacher is more interested in how I learn than what I learn
A real second language teacher doesn't make me feel anxious and afraid
A real second language teacher provides many choices
A real second language teacher lets me teach myself even if it takes longer
A real second language teacher talks so I can understand what he or she means to say
A real second language teacher can make mistakes and admit it
A real second language teacher can show his or her feelings and let me show mine
A real second language teacher wants me to evaluate my own work.

This 'poem' seems to me to capture the atmosphere of a learner-centred classroom. Perhaps we might use it as a stimulus for a brain-storming session where we collect as many key words or concepts as you wish to propose to describe the role of the teacher in this classroom. I suggest that our collective list of key words or concepts be categorised, possibly under the headings: attitude, knowledge and skills. We could then look at some video recordings which reflect quite specific interpretations of the teacher's role and analyse them in the light of the categories which we have established. The videos are:

- 3rd year English class in Denmark
- 2nd year French class in Germany
- Intermediate level Adult EFL class

After discussing these video extracts we might attempt to draw up a typology of teacher competences and the following description of the role of the teacher will then be offered for further discussion and elaboration.

* *

The role of the teacher

The recent emphasis on a more learner-centred approach to second language learning/teaching actually implies an enhanced and more demanding role for the teacher than heretofore. Only a teacher can develop a learner-centred classroom. Recent developments in educational philosophy and in linguistics have challenged many former assumptions about teacher roles and classroom practices which may be summarised in respect of teacher attitudes, knowledge and skills.

Attitude: The teacher is no longer the dispenser of knowledge, the one who decides whose turn it is to speak next, the distributer of sanctions and judgements. She is now seen as a facilitator of learning, a resource, an adviser and a co-participant in the learning process. This involves accepting greater learner initiative and responsibility and reexamining the nature of her contribution to the learning process.

Knowledge: The teacher requires an understanding of the nature of communication, of learning in general, of language learning in particular and of the learner's own contribution to his development as a learner and a communicator in the classroom situation where learning is both an individual activity and a socially-shared experience.

Skills: The teacher needs the ability to apply this knowledge to the learning experiences of the classroom. She must call on a range of skills which demand not only a high degree of competence in the foreign language but also a critical, flexible and experimental approach to teaching, a realization of the nature of the relationship between the process and the product of language learning and the ability to apply this awareness in classroom procedures and techniques.

Whatever diverse interpretations there may be of communicative language teaching it is essentially an attitude to teaching, the implementation of which requires certain knowledge and skills on the part of the teacher.

1. Attitude

(a) facilitator: the teacher facilitates the language learning/acquisition process by providing suitable exposure or comprehensible input for learners (i.e. slightly beyond the learner's level of understanding so as to contain some but not too many new elements) and by setting up appropriate activities which encourage the learner to produce language (comprehensible output).

She realizes that language acquisition is not a simple input-output mechanism but rather a gradual and complex process of elaboration of the learner's grammar. At any stage the learner has a provisional or intermediate competence (interlanguage) and learning may often be a by-product of the attempts to communicate.

Errors may occur in the learner's understanding and/or production where his developing competence is unable to cope with the linguistic demands of a communicative activity. The teacher must know when to tolerate errors in production and when to correct them depending on whether the purpose of the activity is primarily communication or language practice.

The teacher should help the learner to develop a range of communicative strategies to compensate for inadequacies in his intermediate language system e.g. approximation, word-coinage, circumlocution, borrowing from another language, mime, gesture, appealing for assistance. These strategies not only allow learners to compensate but also to learn by testing hypotheses about the target language. This 'strategic competence' is essential as the learner will never have a native command of the target language. A judicious blend of accuracy and fluency oriented activities is essential and in the latter the learner must feel free to take risks with the language. This requires a friendly non-threatening supportive classroom atmosphere/teacher attitude.

A relaxed classroom atmosphere where learner anxiety is reduced will optimise the benefits of comprehensible input. The teacher can provide suitable input 'tuned' to the appropriate stage of the learner's development through varied and graded tasks or activities which allow for different abilities and learning styles.

She must also be willing to allow the learner to become involved in decisions about content, methodology and assessment. This process of negotiation means that while the teacher may be the best judge of some of the learner's language needs, the learner must be able to relate in a personal way to the content and learning activities and assess his own achievement of objectives.

(b) resource: the teacher's use of the target language is a valuable source of input and 'teacher-talk' is usually tuned to the level of the learners. As well as providing a good model of language use and, when appropriate, feedback on the success or otherwise of the learner's efforts to communicate, the teacher is a reference source providing information on the forms and meanings of the target language and information on

the culture associated with it. This is most effective where she is enthusiastic about and empathises with the target language and culture.

(c) adviser: the teacher can advise the learner on general study and language learning skills (e.g. memorising, inferencing, analysing, guessing) so that he can gradually become more autonomous. She can provide individual assistance to learners with particular difficulties and advise them, perceiving weakness and suggesting suitable remedial activities.

(d) learner: the teacher is also a learner of the target language, the difference in the competence of teacher and learners being relative where she is not a native speaker of the language. In particular she is always a learner with regard to the teaching/learning process and must see this as part of a life-long process of continuing education. She learns not to become unduly frustrated but to cope with adverse conditions (e.g. two seater desks bolted to the floor, lack of resources, lack of understanding on the part of the school principal or colleagues, paper-thin walls or partitions, problems arising from learner's poor learning experiences in other subjects, especially in other languages). She learns that a rewarding language experience can contribute enormously to the overall development of the learner but that the language teacher cannot play the role of a 'cosmic shepherd' as there are many other factors involved in the learner's willingness and ability to fully participate in the educational process.

2. Knowledge and skills relating to the role of the teacher

2.1 Knowledge:

(a) - understanding of the nature of language and how it is used for communciation.
(b) - knowledge of the target language and of the target culture.
(c) - knowledge of how learning takes place.
(d) - knowledge of how a second language is learned/acquired and the implication for classroom activities (e.g. text types, task types, when to/not to intervene).
(e) - knowledge of the learner's language needs, of when and how to focus on practice or communication type activities so as to strike a proper balance between accuracy and fluency in classroom activities.
(f) - knowledge of the learner's interests so that he can have the opportunity to relate personally to the learning experiences.
(g) - understanding of key concepts e.g. communicative, learner-centred, autonomy.
(h) - awareness of the multiplicity of factors which influence language teaching and learning e.g. institutional, psychological, sociological, philosophical, economical.

(i) - understanding of the contribution of the foreign language learning experience to the learner's personal development as a learner and as a communicator.

2.2 Skills:

(a) - competence in the target language.
(b) - ability to critically analyse, select from, adapt and supplement commercially available materials (including Teacher's Notes).
(c) - ability to go beyond the textbook, e.g. to work with authentic materials, to improvise.
(d) - ability to provide/devise appropriate graded materials/tasks which allow for different abilities and learning styles so that learners motivation is sustained through growing confidence and enjoyment in language learning.
(e) - competence to set realistic, worthwhile, attainable objectives and to introduce creative and enjoyable tasks.
(f) - ability to prepare, organise and monitor potentially noisy (or disruptive) communicative activities involving pair and group work e.g. role plays, simulations, drama, group listening, reading or writing tasks.
(g) - willingness and ability to gradually involve learners in decisions about content, methods, learning activities and assessment.
(h) - ability to foster study skills, and communication strategies in learners so that they become more autonomous and develop skills for language learning after leaving school.
(i) - ability to appropriately assess learner's progress (i.e. to show them what they can do rather than what they cannot), to diagnose weaknesses and take remedial action and as far as possible to involve learners in the assessment process.
(j) - ability to exploit the classroom as a social situation where the target language is not only practised but used for real communication in organising activities, in discussing, learning, evaluating. This means a realization that the classroom is not simply a rehearsal studio for a later performance (which may never take place).
(k) - ability to act as a researcher i.e. to view the classroom as a laboratory and to continuously try to improve her contribution as a teacher/researcher.
(l) - ability to communicate effectively and with pedagogic sensitivity.

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1. This is adapted from a poem entitled "A Real Teacher" (Greer, M. and Rubinstein, B, Will the Real Teacher Please Stand Up?, Goodyear Publishing Co., 1972). The adaptation is by Howard Altman in The Second Language Classroom: Directions for the 1980's, ed. J.E. Alatis et al, O.U.P., 1981.